

The Second Fu-Manchu Story The Clue of the Pigtail

By Sax Rohmer

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"THE most promising lad at the yard," said Inspector Weymouth; and his usually gruff voice had softened strangely.

Nayland Smith struck his right fist into the palm of his left hand and swore under his breath, ending up and down the next little room. No one spoke for a moment, and in the silence I could hear the whispering of the Thames outside—the Thames which had so many strange secrets to tell and now was burdened with another.

He lay prone upon the deal table—the latest of the river's dead—dressed in rough sailor garb, and to all outward seeming, a seaman of nondescript nationality—such as is to be found in Wapping and Shadwell. His dark, curly hair clung clammy about the brown forehead; his skin was stained, and he wore a gold ring in one ear, and three fingers of the left hand were missing.

"It was almost the same with Mason," the river police inspector was speaking. "Three weeks ago, on a Wednesday, he went off in his own time on some funny business down St. George's way—and Thursday night, at 10 o'clock, got the gruff gruff from the right hand and his left hand was mutilated frightfully."

He paused, and glanced at Smith.

"That lascar, too," he continued, "that you came down to see, sir—you remember his hands?"

Smith nodded.

"He was not a lascar," he said shortly. "He was a dacoit."

Silence fell again.

I turned to the array of objects lying on the table—those which had been found in the dead man's clothing. None of them were noteworthy, except that which had been found thrust into the loose neck of his shirt. This was a small, round, black object, and it was the fact that it was which had led the police to send for Nayland Smith; for it constituted the first clue which had come to light pointing to the authors of these mysterious tragedies.

It was a Chinese pigtail. That alone was sufficiently remarkable; and it was rendered more so by the fact that the pigtail was a false one, being attached to a most ingenious bald wig.

"You're sure it wasn't part of a Chinese make-up?" questioned Weymouth, his eye on the strange relic. "Poor Cadby was clever at disguise."

Smith snatched the wig from my hands, with a certain irritation, and tried to fit it on the dead head.

"Too small by inches!" he jerked; "and look how it's padded in the crown. This thing was made for a most abnormal head."

He threw it down and fell to pacing the room.

"Where did you find him—exactly?" asked Weymouth.

"Limehouse Basin—under Commercial Dock Pier—exactly an hour ago."

"And you last saw him at 8 o'clock last night?" to Weymouth.

"Eight to a quarter past."

"You think he has been dead nearly twenty-four hours, Petrie?"

"Roughly."

"Then, we know that Cadby was on the track of the Fu-Manchu group; that he followed up some clue which led him to the neighborhood of old Ratcliffe Highway; and that he died the same night. You are sure that is where he was going?"

"Yes," said Weymouth. "He was jealous of giving anything away, poor chap; it meant a big lift for him if he pulled the case off; but he gave me to understand that he expected to spend last night in that district. He left the yard about 8, as I've said, and to go to his rooms and dress for the job."

"Did he keep any record of his cases?"

"Of course. He was most particular. Cadby was a man with ambitions, sir. You'll want to see his book. We went to get his address. It's somewhere in Britton."

He went to the telephone, and Inspector Ryman covered up the dead man's face.

Nayland Smith was palpably excited.

"He almost succeeded where we have failed, Petrie!" he said. "There is no doubt in my mind that he was on the track of Fu-Manchu! Poor Mason had probably blundered on the scent, too, and met with a similar fate. Without other evidence, the fact that they both died in the same way as the dacoit would be conclusive; for we know that Fu-Manchu killed the dacoit."

"What is the meaning of the mutilated hands, Smith?"

"God knows! Cadby's death was from drowning, you say."

"There are no other marks of violence."

"But he was a very strong man, doctor!" interrupted Inspector Ryman. "Why, he pulled off the quarter-mile championship at the Crystal Palace last year! He was an R. R. and like a fish in the water!"

Smith shrugged his shoulders helplessly.

"Let us suppose he was a strong man, how they died, sir, simply."

Weymouth returned from the telephone.

"The address is No. 10, Gold Street Lane," he reported.

"I shall not be able to come along, but you can't miss it—it's down beside the Britton Police Station. I'll send a car to take you there. It's a very nice house, and the case book isn't in the American desk, which you'll find in his sitting room; it's in the Chinese desk, which is on the left. Here are his keys, intact. I think this is the cupboard key."

Smith nodded.

"Come on, Petrie!" he said. "We haven't a second to waste!"

Our car was waiting, and in a few seconds we were speeding along Wapping High Street. We had gone no more than a few hundred yards, I think, when Smith suddenly stopped the car, and turned to me.

"That pigtail!" he cried. "I have left it behind! We must have it, Petrie! Stop!"

The car had pulled up, and Smith alighted.

"The authorities—"

"Don't wait for me!" he directed hurriedly. "Here—take Weymouth's card. Remember, come straight on to Scotland Yard and meet me there."

"But, Smith," I protested, "a few minutes can make no difference!"

"Can't it?" he snapped. "Do you suppose Fu-Manchu is going to leave evidence like this already, but there is just a bare chance?"

Of my drive that night I remember nothing, for so long the thought was that the cab was outside the house for which I was bound, and I realized that we had quite the whole of the night before us. Yet I had had leisure to review the whole of the events which had crowded my life since the return of Nayland Smith from Burma.

Smith had looked upon the dead Sir Crick as a man who had killed him. Now, with the return of Nayland Smith, the shadow of that giant evil seemed to lie upon it like a palpable cloud.

Cadby's old landlady, Mrs. Dolan, was a queer mixture of fear and embarrassment in her manner.

"Oh, sir," she cried, "don't tell me that anything has happened to him! And diving something of the kind, son of mine, I was come, for such sad luck often falls to the lot of the medical man. 'Oh! the poor brave lad!'"

And again: "Oh! the poor brave lad!"

Indeed, I respected the dead man's memory more than ever from that hour, since the sorrow of the worthy old soul was quite pathetic, and spoke eloquently for the unhappy cause of it.

"There was a terrible walling at the back of the house last night, doctor, and I heard it again tonight a second before you knocked. Poor lad! It was the same when his mother died!"

At the moment I paid little attention to her words, for such beliefs are common, unfortunately; but when she said that, I knew that I was in for a long and interesting investigation.

And now the old lady's embarrassment took precedence of her sorrow, and presently the truth came out.

"There's a young lady—in her room, sir."

I started. This might mean little or might mean much.

"She came and waited for him last night, doctor—ten till half past one, and then she went away. She came the third time about an hour ago, and has been upstairs since."

"Do you know her, Mrs. Dolan?"

"Well, doctor," she said, wiping her eyes with a white cloth. "I don't know her, but I like a mother to him—but not the girl I should have liked a son of mine to take up with."

At any other time this would have been amusing; now, it might be serious. Mrs. Dolan's account of the waiting became suddenly more important, for it meant that one of Fu-Manchu's followers was watching another of Fu-Manchu's servants. Was that beautiful lure of men, even now in the house, completing her evil work?

"I should never have allowed her in the house," began Mrs. Dolan again. Then there was an interruption.

A soft rustling reached my ears—intimately feminine.

The girl was stealing down the stairs, and she turned and fled blindly before me—back up the stairs! Taking three steps at a time, I followed her, bounded into the room above almost at her heels, and stood with my back to the door.

She covered the desk by the window, and a slim figure in a clinging silk gown, which alone explained the

Dolan's distrust. The gaslight was turned very low and he had shaded her face, but could not hide its startling beauty; could not mar the brilliancy of the skin, nor dim the wonderful eyes of this modern Delilah. For it was she!

"So I came in time!" I said grimly, and turned the key in the lock.

"Calmly she paced at that, and stood facing me, leaning back with her jewel-laden hands clutching the desk edge.

"Give me whatever you have removed from here," I said sternly. "And then prepare to accompany me."

She took a step forward, her eyes wide with fear, her lips parted.

"I have taken nothing!" she said. Her breast was heaving tumultuously. "Oh! let me go! please let me go!"

And impulsively she threw herself forward, pressing clasped hands against my shoulder and looking up into my face with passionate pleading.

It is with some shame that I confess how her charm enveloped me. Like a magic cloud, unfamiliar with the complex oriental temperament, I had laughed at Nayland Smith when he had spoken of this girl's infatuation.

"Love in the east," he had said, "is like the conch of a mango tree; it is born, grows, and flowers in the air of a hand. Now in her face I read the confirmation of his words. Her clothes or her hair exhaled a faint perfume. Like all Fu-Manchu's servants, she was perfectly chosen for her peculiar duties. Her beauty was wholly intoxicating."

But I trusted her away.

"You have no claim to mercy!" I said. "Do not count upon any. What have you taken from here?"

She grasped the lapels of my coat. I felt how she trembled.

"I will tell you all I can—all I dare!" she panted, eagerly, fearfully. "I should know how to deal with your friend, but with you—I am lost! If you could only understand—my love would not be so cruel!" Her slight accent added charm to the musical voice. "I am not free, as your English women are. What I do, I must do, for it is the will of my master—and I am only a slave. And you are not a man if you can give me to the police! You have no heart if you can forget that I tried to save you once!"

I had feared that plea; for, in her own oriental fashion, she certainly had tried to save me from a deadly peril—at the expense of my friend. But I had feared the plea—for I did not know how to meet it. How could I give her up, perhaps to stand her trial for murder? And now I felt silent, and she saw why I was silent.

"I may deserve no mercy—I may be even as bad as you think; but what have you to do with the police? It is not your work to hound a woman to death! Could you ever look another woman in the eyes—one that you loved, and know that she trusted you—if you had done such a thing? Ah! I have no friend in all the world, or I should not be here! Do not be my enemy, my judge, and make me worse than I am; be my friend, and save me from him!"

The beautiful face was close to mine; her breath fanned my cheek. "Have mercy on me!"

At that moment I honestly would have given half of my worldly possessions to have been spared the decision which I knew I must make. To after all, what proof had I that she was a willing accomplice of Dr. Fu-Manchu? Furthermore, she was an oriental, and her code must necessarily be different from mine. Irreconcilable as the thing may be with western ideas, I had to admit that she was a woman.

Nayland Smith had really told me that he believed the girl to be a slave. Then there remained that other reason why I loathed the idea of becoming her captor. It was almost tantamount to betrayal! Must I sell my hands with such work now?

Thus I suppose her seductive beauty arguing against me, and the thought of the jeweled fingers grasping my shoulders nervously, and her slim body quivering under my gaze, I saw that I was in a most difficult position. I was an abandonment of pleading despair. Then I remembered the fate of the man in whose room we stood.

"You loved Cadby to his death!" I said—and shook my head.

"No! No!" she cried wildly, clutching at me. "No! I swear by the holy name! I did not! I did not! I did not!"

Yes! But listen! It was because he would not be warned that he met his death! I could not save him! I could not! I could not! I could not!

Will tell you—I have taken his notebook and torn out the last page, and now I am in a most difficult position. The book was too big to steal away. It was a book twice and could not find it! They will kill you if you let go of it!

"If you will tell me where and how to seize Dr. Fu-Manchu—yes!"

"A new reward was upon her."

"Then you would—do you dare?"

"She was watching me intently."

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to spend an hour in the company of Shen-Yan's opium fiend!"

Some twenty minutes later two dangerous-looking seafaring ruffians entered a waiting cab, accompanied by Inspector Weymouth, and were driven off into the wilderness of London's night. In this theatrical business there was, to my mind, something ridiculous—almost childish; and I could have laughed heartily had it not been that grim tragedy lurked so near to face.

The mere recollection that somewhere at our journey's end Fu-Manchu awaited us was sufficient to sober my reflections. Fu-Manchu, who with all the powers represented by Nayland Smith pitted against him, pursued his dark schemes triumphantly and lurked in hiding within this very area which was so sedulously patrolled: Fu-Manchu, whom I had never seen, but whose name stood for horrors indefinable! Perhaps I was destined to meet the terrible Chinese doctor tonight!

I seemed to pursue a train of thought which promised to lead to morbid depths, and directed my attention to what Smith was saying.

"We will drop down from Wapping and reconnoiter, as you say the place is close to the river side. Then you can put us ashore somewhere below. Ryman can keep the launch close to the back of the premises and our fellows will be hanging about near the front—near enough to hear the whistle."

"Yes," assented Weymouth. "I've arranged for that. If you are suspected, you shall give the alarm?"

"I won't," said Smith thoughtfully. "Even in that event I might wait a while."

He lived behind the dirty curtain, Smith and I following, and ran up a dark stair. The next moment I found myself in an atmosphere which fairly got me by the throat. I was all but unbearable, being loaded with opium fumes. Never before had I experienced anything like it. Every breath was an agony. A tinny lamp on a box in the middle of the floor dimly illuminated the horrible place, about the walls of which ten or twelve bunks were ranged and all of them occupied. Most of the occupants were lying motionless, but some were sitting up, squatting in their bunks noisily sucking at the little metal pipes. These had not yet attained to the opium smoker's Nirvana.

"No loom—same tella you," said Shen-Yan, completely testing Smith's shilling fifth his yellow, decayed teeth.

Smith walked to a corner and propped, cross-legged on the floor, pulling in down with him.

"Two pipe quick!" he said. "Plenty room! Two pieces pipe—or plenty heap trouble!"

Yan handed him the pipe, which he promptly put to his lips, and prepared another for me.

"Whatever you do, don't inhale any!" came Smith's whispered injunction.

It was with a sense of nausea, greater even than that occasioned by the disgusting atmosphere of the den, that I took the pipe and pretended to smoke. I was near the door, and my friend, I allowed my head gradually to sink lower and lower, until, within a few minutes, I was sprawled on the floor, my head resting close beside me.

"The ship's sinking!" droned a voice from one of the bunks. "Look at the rats!"

Yan had noisily withdrawn and I experienced a curious sense of relief. The air was now less oppressive, and the opium fumes were less insupportable. My throat was parched with the fumes; my head ached. The vicious atmosphere seemed contaminating.

I was as one dropped

• • • somewhere east of Suez, where the best is like the worst, and the worst is like the best. There aren't ten Commandments, and a man can raise a thirst.

Smith began to whisper softly.

"We have waited it through successfully so far," he